

NOW AND THEN

By John D. Bell © 1976

People are Town Hall. People bought it out of their tax pockets, then elected three 1886 selectmen to fill its new rooms. People of 1976, worried about Town Hall's heavy tower, hired engineer **George Horowitz** to find out whether people in its basement, first floor, auditorium, balconies and attic were in any danger. People felt relieved by George's summary: "May you get another 100 years from the building!"

People are amazing. In 1886, without power tools except steam-driven derricks to hoist heavy beams, workmen created Town Hall in less than a year. Those craftsmen cut wood (ranging from tiny ornamental details to 60-foot 12x14's) so cunningly that you couldn't slip a razor blade into joints. Provincetown's ancestors, wherever they are, can be proud of this legacy.

Town Hall is people. For 90 years Town Hall has seen people of all kinds pass through its big doors, and—who knows?—maybe the creaking hinges are laughing at some, gossiping about some, crying for others. The old building feels human, as if its wood had absorbed human vibes so long that it now sends out its own vibes, like a sympathetic friend.

Musical Chairs

In 1888 Selectmen **Marshall L. Adams**, **James A. Small** and **Charles H. Dyer** occupied the biggest office in Town Hall. Generations of selectmen followed them into that office. In 1954, five new-elected selectmen (**Francis A. Santos**, **Clarence Kacergis**, the late **Frank D. Henderson**, **Joseph Lema Jr.** and **Joseph T. Ferreira**) hired our first town manager, **Thomas A. Libby**. Tom shifted offices and men around. Clerk and Treasurer **George S. Chapman** died that year. Tom's new treasurer, **Frank C. Bent**, went to the other end of Town Hall, and Tom's new town clerk, **William Garten**, moved into the selectmen's office. Poor **George Chapman's** southeast corner office became the manager's office. A year later, Tom's successor, **James V. Coyne**, installed **Mary C. Cordeiro** in the outer office to act as his secretary and diplomat.

In 1970 Town Manager **Michael A. Botello** moved into the judge's chamber in the southwest corner of Town Hall. He sat in the still-warm, high-backed, oak-and-leather swivel chair that Judge **Walter Welsh** had handed down to his son, Judge **Robert A. Welsh**. Later, that chair was offered to Town Counsel **Robert A. Welsh, Jr.** By that time, however, Second District Court had



Town Hall before 1920

Photo by Louis Snow

moved into the new courthouse in Orleans, and Chief Justice **Bob Welsh** didn't take the chair with him. (Town Manager **Robert W. Killoran** sits in it these days.)

Selectmen named the former courtroom the Judge Welsh Hearing Room. The judge's bench looked smaller with five selectmen crowded behind it. People who used to attend the Tuesday court sessions to hear their neighbors' troubles (and, on occasion, to testify against or for them) sat in on Monday selectmen's meetings instead. They played much the same roles as before.

Swapping Offices

Earlier, former Welfare Director

Irving S. Rogers occupied a cubbyhole at the north end of Town Hall, next door to Frank Bent's cubicle. Irving's assistant, **Amy McKain**, sat hidden away in the northeast corner room. When Irv retired to Las Vegas, Amy became director and worked in Town Hall until the state took over public welfare and moved her office to Orleans. Amy has retired now; her cubbyhole in Town Hall is a custodians' supply room.

Next door to it, another cubbyhole filled so rapidly with Frank Bent's tax records that piles of them had to be stacked upstairs on the steps winding alongside the auditorium stage. When

Frank retired, Treasurer-Tax Collector **M. Jeannette Segura** soon moved into **Amy McKain's** old office and made room for her assistants by building a counter across one end of Caucus Hall. (This old room, once echoing to political partisanship, still echoes when the Finance Committee sits around the four-by-twelve oak table to argue Town finances.)

Frank Bent's office filled again, this time with assessors' maps and file cards. Clerk of Assessors **John C. Corea**, who used to disarm angry taxpayers with warm greetings and friendly patience, knew where everything was in it. He could find your property on Town Engineer **Francis J. Alves'** assessors' maps as readily as Francis can tell you how your lot lines got drawn in decades past. John and Francis, both retired now, have calmed troubled waters for hundreds of Provincetowners.

Speaking of Water

Timbered town halls like ours long ago came under Public Safety Department rules requiring sprinkler systems to douse a blaze that starts unseen. In every part of Town Hall, from basement to steeple, pipes studded with automatic valves hang ready to supply water to any valve that opens when fire melts its heat-sensitive stopper.

Normally these pipes are dry, filled with compressed air. If a valve opens, letting the air out, water rushes in and simultaneously sounds a fire alarm.

January 7, 1959, the fire sirens were silent, but somehow water had filled the sprinkler system. Late that cold afternoon a frozen pipe high in the belfry cracked open. Then another. Tons of water cascaded down into Town Hall.

Manager **Coyne** and Selectman **John C. Snow** were walking outside the hall when water began coming out through the walls. They called Fire Chief **James J. Roderick** to send men with tarpaulins to cover vital town records. When Jimmy saw the mess, he called the whole fire department. Firemen, public works employees and town officials worked until 3:30 the next morning to protect records and begin mopping-up operations. Jimmy used a smoke ejector to help dry the auditorium floor.

If you plan to visit the Azores or Lisbon, and need your birth certificate to get a passport, look for water stains on your birth record.

They could become a footnote to your biography some day: "J(o)e Celebrity was — years old at the time of the Great Flood in Town Hall."